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ABSTRACT

A two-year ethnographic study of dialogic literary circles in Spain explored the learning experience of adults who participated in them. In a dialogic society, educational projects providing real opportunities for transformation and overcoming inequalities usually had a dialogic orientation and promoted instrumental learning as well as critical reflection and democratic participation. These four elements of the dialogic approach present in the literary circle were focused upon to explain the whole process of learning and transformation: intersubjective dialogue, universal learning capacity, recreation of the lifeworld, and transformation. The ethnographic study in two literary circles in two adult learning centers uncovered how participants construct meaning from their learning experience in the literary circle. It intended to capture the essence of the literary circle--how participants made meaning of their involvement with the classic literature and shared experience of the circle. Data were collected through participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and Federation of Participants' Associations documents. The main finding was a new understanding of the reading event, dialogic reading. These four dimensions that take place in the dialogic reading process were identified: collective interpretation, communicative reading comprehension, critical reading, and transformation. (Contains 27 references.) (YLB)

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Dialogic Reading: Adult learners crossing cultural borders

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INTRODUCTION

> *It was hard to understand, but as I listened to each of the readers was becoming easier. . . . Some of us believed the book was a kind of allegory: that the rats symbolized ideas such as intolerance and racism, and the 'plague' was the kind of contamination these ideas were spreading among the city's inhabitants. (Participant's voice)*

This comment was made by a participant in a literary circle when they were reading *The Plague*, by Camus. She is an adult learner who had never read books before and became a reader in a dialogic literary circle. The dialogic literary circle is a reading program addressed to adult learners with no academic background, that is, adult learners who never attended college. They only read classic literature. Therefore, in the circle, participants who had never read a book and had been labeled as "illiterate" now read Kafka, Lorca, Woolf, Cervantes, and Joyce. This is just the most visible result of a learning process that has many dimensions and whose complete description requires a broader understanding of the reading event.

In this paper I present the result of a two-year ethnographic study of the dialogic literary circles in Spain, which concluded in my doctoral dissertation. The study explores the learning experience of adults who participate these circles.

PERSPECTIVES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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The dialogic literary circles in Spain do not emerge and grow in isolation but as a result of the dialogic trend of society and its consequent social change and influence on adult education. The

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first literary circle was born in 1980 in Barcelona, during a time in which many progressive educational projects raised again after many years of dictatorship. Today, the literary circles have organized themselves into a network coordinated by CONFAPEA (the Spanish Confederation of Adult Education Participants' Associations) and this is one of they reasons why the number of literary circles has grown dramatically since 1996. In fact, they are now part of a broader adult education movement that is calling for democratic and participatory education for all people.

I situate the theoretical analysis of this reading program --and the adult literacy component of it—within the framework of the dialogic society and dialogic social and educational sciences. Today, society is becoming dialogic and there is a tendency in people's social practices and relationships towards dialogue (Flecha, Gomez, & Puigvert, 2001). Traditional institutions, norms, and social roles that were once pillars of industrial society are now being rethought and modified in the information society. People's lives are now affected directly or indirectly, by the revolution in information and communication technologies, the globalization of the economy, and the resulting perceived risks and uncertainties about futures. Therefore, today people need to negotiate new meaning and agreements with the others with whom they live, work, and learn.

Although information society is polarizing social exclusion, new possibilities for change by means of dialogue are emerging and helping to overcome inequalities, particularly in education. Contemporary authors who are analyzing the new society are formulating dialogic proposals for its democratization (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994; Castells, 1996; 1999; Freire, 1998; Habermas, 1998). Social and educational research is also following this dialogic trend, and researchers recognize that there is no real difference in the social roles of researchers and social actors in the production of knowledge.

In order to explain the literary circle as a new model for reading in dialogic societies, I have constructed by conceptual framework and perspective of analysis from an interdiciplinary approach. I must highlight the relevance in this study of the works of Freire (1970; 1997) and his dialogic pedagogy, Habermas (1984) and a theory based on people's communicative rationality, Vygotsky's (1986) socio-historical approach to human development and learning and CREA's (1999) concept of cultural intelligence. They, among others, recognize the role of human interactions in the creation of meaning and the transformation of society.

Dialogic elements manifested in the circles

In a dialogic society, those educational projects that are providing real opportunities for transformation and for overcoming inequalities usually have a dialogic orientation. This means that they promote instrumental learning[1] as well as critical reflection and democratic participation. The literary circle, as a project grounded in the dialogic tendency of society, is providing real opportunities for adult learners with no academic background to access literature and culture. Thus, it is breaking social stereotypes and deficit theories about adult learners' capacities and motivation for education. This is a reading program strongly focused on participants' dialogic relationships, that today are spreading in Spain and taking shape as a social movement within the field of adult education.

Adult educators have promoted dialogic learning through diverse experiences, in diverse educational settings, and in different parts of the world. Such learning has often been promoted through emancipatory pedagogies that take into account adult learners' life experiences as well as their voices and opinions, so that they participate in their own learning and in the transformation of their environments. Dialogic practices are, therefore, not new in the field of adult education. Today, many progressive adult educators are reinventing former emancipatory projects and philosophies by including them as part of the most updated pedagogies (Comings, Garner & Smith, 2000; Cunningham, 1993; Puigvert & Flecha, 2001; Sánchez-Aroca, 1999). For example, adult educators like Paulo Freire or Myles Horton,[2] who began their work many decades ago, are cited today, in the middle of the information age, as modern theorists in adult

[1] By *instrumental learning* I refer to the learning of knowledge, skills, and specific contents that can be associated with academic learning or resulting from instruction.

[2] During the 1960s Paulo Freire started working with Latin America peasants in the struggle for their freedom. Until his death some thirty years later, he was constantly reinventing his proposals for dialogism. Many scholars and educators criticize Freires ideas of social emancipation claiming his work is out of date, but they often ignore the evolution of Freire's thought: he continuously reflected on and redefined his work, in permanent dialogue with other critical intellectuals, in order to radicalize his democratic proposals with the times (Freire, 1970-1998; Brizuela & Soler, 1999). Similarly, Myles Horton (1998) founded the Highlander Center in 1932 in Tennessee, and developed an experience of community education and activism in dialogue with labor unions and civil rights movements that is still growing today. Some popular education movements that arose in the 1960s and 1970s became bureaucratized while others became immobilized by the spread of fatalism (Freire, 1997), and others have survived because they transformed and redefined themselves (Heaney, 1992). Still, we see today that these dialogic proposals are not an idealism of the past but a pedagogy for the 21st century (Flecha & Botey, 1998).

education.

The literary circle is a space in which ordinary people participate in an educational project that promotes literature and culture; in it they learn and transform their lives and their environments. In order to explain the whole process of learning and transformation I focused on four elements of the dialogic approach that are present in the literary circle: 1) *intersubjective dialogue*; 2) *universal learning capacity*; 3) *recreation of the lifeworld*; and 4) *transformation*. These four elements of the dialogic approach, applied to the experience of reading in the literary circle, contributed to the understanding of the reading event through a broader lenses.

First, *intersubjectivity*,is the interaction among subjects capable of language and action (Habermas, 1984). Both Habermas and Freire frequently reflect on people's relationships and actions based on dialogue. Habermas (1984) argues that people in their everyday practices use communicative ways of reasoning to structure their lifeworld[3] on the basis of understanding and agreement. The idea of communicative rationality and intersubjectivity is also the basis of proposals such as Freire's (1970, 1998b) that elaborate on the centrality of interaction among educators and learners. Looking at the foundations of communicative rationality and egalitarian dialogue is key to understanding and explaining the dialogic nature of the literary circle, and to trusting in the capacity that all participants have for learning and participating in this cultural activity.

A second key element in the literary circle is related to the fact that learning capacity is not questioned; nor is the capacity for reading, understanding, and formulating opinions about any kind of book. When people find a space in which they can develop their potential for learning and overcome learning barriers they prove they can engage in any kind of learning. Many of the circle participants did not have educational opportunities or an education relevant to their culture, knowledge, and needs. For this reason I focus on those theories that stress a *universal capacity for learning*, overcome both subjectivism and constructivism, and focus on how people expand their knowledge and develop their abilities through social interaction.

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[3] As mentioned above, Habermas (1984-1987) distinguishes between the lifeworld and system. While the lifeworld is the interactions among people, systems are the social structures. According to Habermas this is a dual model that helps explain society and social changes.

CREA (1999) has developed a theory of dialogic learning that is explained in seven principles. Two of these principles—cultural intelligence and instrumental dimension—are key to the dialogic literary circle. Cultural intelligence acknowledges the universal status of learning and the potential for creativity and cultural creation that can develop in a communicative environment. Instrumental learning refers to the knowledge and skills typically acquired through instruction or valued in academic environments (CREA, 1999). For instance, in the literary circle, reading a classic work leads adult learners to look for more information on the Internet or in dictionaries or even to learn languages. Therefore, the universality of intelligence and learning, as well as the relationship of communicative, practical and academic skills—which are part of cultural intelligence—is relevant as a framework that helps explain the creative process of becoming literate in the literary circle.

The third element, *reinvention of the lifeworld*, becomes manifest in the literary circle in two ways. First, in the literary circle people rediscover the communicative rationality of their lifeworld, as well as the communicative spaces that they had lost living in one city where their life spaces were taken over by bureaucracy and routine. Many recover meaning in the circle, which lets them reinvent their lifeworld by sharing experiences with other participants. Second, as they engage in dialogues about the books, participants rethink their lifeworld in the same way they are rethinking their lives. In a dialogic society, people question the superiority of expert knowledge, that of a teacher or of specialists, for instance in literature studies (Beck, 1992). People are not cultural dopes (Garfinkel, 1967); all the participants' contributions to the dialogue create knowledge about reality, in a critical way as part of a rich intellectual debate.

The fourth element is *transformation*. Freire (1997) says that we are beings of transformation and not of accommodation. People who attend the literary circles have been excluded from education and a certain kind of culture and many have internalized a feeling of inferiority. Freire is interested in explaining how people experience forms of domination and oppression and how they get caught in a culture of silence. He, however, believes in people's agency and in what Habermas (1996) defines as "communicative power." He states that we need to denounce inequality and oppression and propose alternative ways to overcome this situation. Intellectuals who only criticize without offering critical solutions help perpetuate situations of injustice and oppression. Opposing these intellectuals, critical educators believe in the emancipatory possibilities of education and provide proposals for social change (Freire, 1998;

Giroux, 1992, Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; De los Reyes, 2001).

The literary circle shows that experience of egalitarian practices in dialogic spaces is usually reproduced in other aspects of people's lives. This framework of social transformation helps us analyze how the dialogic literary circles, besides being a focus of accelerated learning, critical reflection and personal transformation, are spreading and becoming a social movement, within the Spanish social movement of participants in adult education. The literary circle becomes part of a social movement where participants organize themselves and their activities, and claim their rights within a wider educational and cultural framework. As a social movement, participants formulate dreams and make them real, and thus help to "shape society from below" (Beck, 1994).

The four dialogic elements I highlight reflect the dialogic turn of social, educational, and cognitive sciences. Drawing from an interdisciplinary approach, I discuss the dialogic nature of people's interactions and the criteria for egalitarian dialogue, the universal capacities of all learners and their learning potential, the process of critical thinking about life and society, and the possibilities of personal and contextual transformation. Through these theoretical elements I define the dialogic conceptual framework that helped me later expalin, by contrasting it with the ethnographic data, the dialogic dimensions of reading in the literary circles.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

In order to uncover how participants construct meaning from their learning experience in the literary circle, I conducted an ethnographic study in two literary circles, located in two adult learning centers: "La Verneda Sant Marti", in Barcelona, and "Cultura Viva", in Sant Boi de Llobregat (both cities are in Spain). My intention was to capture the essence of the literary circle, particularly, how participants made meaning of their involvement with the classic literature and with the shared experience of the circle. With this approach I started my study searching for answers to the following ethnographic questions:

Research Questions

1. What is happening in the dialogic literary circle?

    - How do adult learners interact among themselves and with the teacher?

- How do adult learners interact with the readings?

2. How do adult learners perceive their participation in the literary circle?
   - What are the different reasons why people participate in this program?
   - How do participants perceive their learning process?
3. What does being literate mean for adult learners in the literary circle?
   - How do participants understand literature, culture, and learning?
   - How do participants perceive themselves and others in relation to literacy?

Data collection

I gathered data through different sources:

- participant observation
- interviews with participants and teachers.
- focus groups
- interview with the president of the Federation of Participants' Associations (who is promoting the reading program nationally)
- documents provided by the Federation

I conducted participant observation for eighteen months in two literary circles in the two adult learning centers mentioned above. Both are located within working-class neighborhoods, areas rarely targeted by the usual cultural institutions. I thus attended their weekly sessions in both sites. I also interviewed participants (15) and teachers (2) from both centers, conducted communicative focus groups with participants, collected documents from FACEPA (Catalan Federation of Participants' Associations in Adult Education), participated in FACEPA's monthly coordination meetings, and interviewed the president of this federation. Moreover, I attended the Dialogic Literary Circles' Annual Conference in April 2000. All data was transcribed and analyzed.

RESULTS

The main finding of this study --and what I consider to be the main contribution of the study to the field of adult literacy-- is a new understanding of the reading event that I have defined as "dialogic reading". Dialogic reading implies moving the focus of meaning making from the subjective experience of an individual reader who interacts with the text to the collective experience of many readers who share their interpretations and reflect together about the text. Therefore, meaning making is not a subjective process but becomes a collective process. The key in this process is the concept of intersubjectivity.

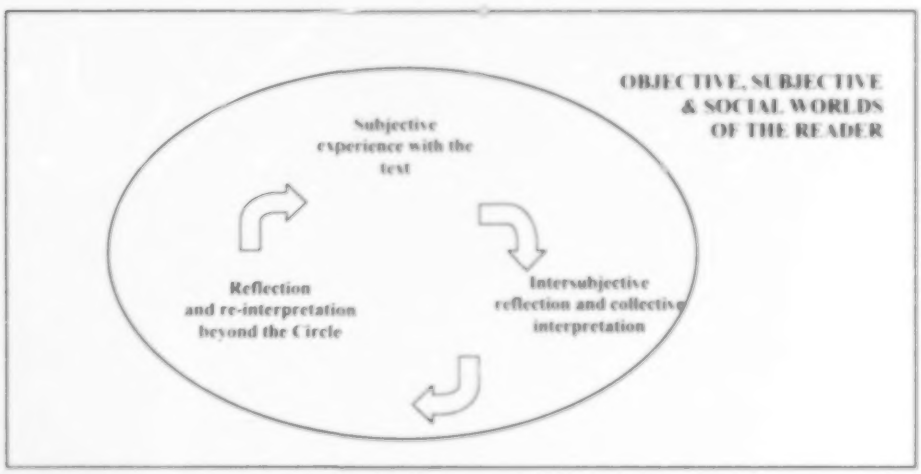

Figure 1: Process of dialogic reading

Thus, "dialogic reading" can be defined as the intersubjective process of reading and making meaning from text, in which readers strengthen their instrumental reading comprehension, deepen their literary interpretation, and reflect critically about life and society through egalitarian dialogue with other readers, thus opening possibilities of personal and social transformation as a reader and as a person in the world. In the literary circle, reading is not just related to the meaning of the text or the subjective interpretation of that text, but it involves participants' interaction and their contexts' transformation.

I analyzed this process of dialogic reading, on the one hand, drawing from theoretical elements of the social, educational and cognitive sciences that are included the communicative

paradigm. Thus, I have built my theoretical framework by using the works of authors such as Habermas, Beck, Touraine, Freire, Chomsky, Bruner, and Vygotsky, among others. On the other hand, I drew from the participants' own perceptions of their reading experience. Through this analysis I identified four dimensions that take place in the dialogic reading process:

- collective interpretation
- communicative reading comprehension
- critical reading
- transformation

First dimension: Collective interpretation

Collective interpretation takes place evey time participants interact and discuss their personal intrepretations through intersubjective dialogue. In the circle, collective interpretation can take place because dialogue is held in terms of equality. It is key the fact that all participants have equal opportunity to speak, that speaking turns are respected, and that those who tend to speak less are given the priority. Collective interpretation promotes dialogic creativity becaause it implies the possibility of enriching literary interpretation through the dialogue and reflection among a variety of life experiences and cultural knowledge and worldviews, merging popular knowledge, with the literary images of the classics and the academic world.

Second dimension: Communicative reading comprehension

Through dialogic reading, participants develop new reading skills and learning strategies by means of communication. In the circle, learning starts from the assumption that all participants have universal capacity to develop any kind of knowledge and skill, a concept that has been defined as cultural intelligence. The literary circle promotes a learning environment with high expectations. Participants find a space in which they are valued and their capacities recognized. They find the confirmation that what they read at home is correct and worth sharing in the circle, strengthening self-confidence in their capacity for comprehension. Also, they get the learners interactions become a support to understanding the different parts and nuances of the text. Through dialogic reading, the instrumental learning dimension is stressed.

Third dimension: Critical reading

Dialogue promotes critical reflection about the books and about social issues. Participants have said that classic literature is a mirror that projects their lives and their society. In the dialogue, the most important is not to find the "correct" meaning of the text, but to use the text in order to discuss and reflect about issues of literature and life. Also, in the literary circle, people find a space for dialogue and conversation that recreates the communicative rationality of their lives. In this way, they can use their means of communication and linguistic codes to talk about "high" literature and to create knowledge.

Fourth dimension: Transformation

Dialogic reading provides the possibility of achieving personal and social transformation. Sharing the reading builds a safe space to share and question with others held assumptions and beliefs about themselves and about their role in society. On the one hand, participants break free from social and cultural false stereotypes that have been associated to them. They can transform a deficit image of *self* they many adult learners have internalized from society. Once they break this negative image, they dare to speak in public, to say their opinions, and to make their voces heard. They also dare to assert and demonstrate their motivation for art and culture. Many participants increase their social participation, and become active in social movements and community organizations, they dare to speak like they do in the circle because they know they opinions are valid. On the other hand, participants' interactions promote the transformation of their social environments. They are in also expanding the egalitarian dialogue beyond the circle, shaping society from below.

Concluding, the experience of participants in the literary circles, provides an exceptional example of the possibilities of dialogic reading. The centrality of dialogism and intersubjectivity in relation to literacy, provides a step forward that challenges our understandings of the reading event, and opens new avenues for research and practice.

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